



Standing up for Racial Justice

A Starter Guide on Policy & Advocacy in Wisconsin



KIDS FORWARD

Every Kid. Every Family. Every Community.

Introduction

Building Effective Policy Advocacy Through a Focus on Racial Equity

To achieve racial equity, we must understand the impact racism has had on policies within structures, systems, and institutions. We know communities of color are currently and have historically been disproportionately affected by deeply rooted structural racism.

We envision this guide as a tool to empower community members, stakeholders and decision makers to examine decisions, policies, and practices within state government and determine the ways in which decisions, policies and/or practices impact communities of color. We must begin by acknowledging and addressing the history of institutionalized racism reflected within current policies as a foundation upon which to improve the development of equitable policies in the future.

This guide provides information and strategies that center racial equity in effective policy advocacy. It includes:

- [Understanding Advocacy](#)
- [Historical Context of Policy & Race](#)
- [The Structure of the Wisconsin State Government](#)
- [Wisconsin State Budget](#)
- [Policy Advocacy Toolkit](#)
- [Obstacles to Voting](#)



We hope this guide serves as a critical starting point to help communities engage in the decisions that directly impact them.

Key Concepts

Racial equity “is a process of eliminating racial disparities and improving outcomes for everyone” (Race Forward).

Multiple Race to Equity reports highlight greater challenges and barriers to well-being in Black and Latinx communities than in white communities. This is the ongoing consequence of racism. View the [Dane County Race to Equity report here](#), and the [Rock County Race to Equity report here](#).

Understanding Advocacy

To achieve racial equity, the root causes of racial inequities must first be addressed. This includes, but is not limited to, the elimination of policies, practices, and attitudes that reinforce differential outcomes by race. The U.S. history of slavery, Jim Crow laws, and segregation serve as the foundations for current systems and structures. These foundations and systems continue to benefit white people and disadvantage people of color. Racial equity means working to dismantle white supremacy and other systems that contribute to inequity.

A society that prioritizes racial equity ensures equitable outcomes that allow children and families to thrive within the intersections of their identities, including race, ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation, ability, and socioeconomic background.

Advocacy

The term advocacy means taking action on behalf of an issue through the use of multilevel strategies. Advocacy can occur at the individual, local, and institutional level.

Advocates utilize their power to bring awareness and inspire action in support of an issue they are passionate about. Any action that works towards creating change is considered advocacy.

Education about social injustice is a critical first step. By engaging in small actions, advocates can develop the skills necessary for meaningful advocacy.

As folks plan and navigate advocacy efforts, it is important to understand that various systems and intersections often lead to inequitable outcomes for people and communities of color. Advocacy efforts should center racial equity in order to address inequitable opportunities by race.

Policy Advocacy

Policy advocacy is a form of advocacy that specifically targets laws, procedures, rules, funding decisions, and decision makers within governing bodies, such as city councils, school boards, and state agencies and Legislatures. This type of work focuses on improving policies or influencing the development of policy at the local, state, or federal level and state legislatures.

Advocating for racial equity, means acknowledging the impact of policies on people and communities of color. To advance equitable policies it is imperative to engage, listen to and learn from the populations most affected within policy advocacy efforts.



Organizing

Organizing is a method of advocacy that includes engagement and collaboration between members of communities and organizations to address specific issues and shared interests. The objective of organizing is to build power to influence decision-making and to change conditions within communities.

An example of a powerful organizing movement is the Black Lives Matter Movement. In 2013, three Black female organizers—Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi—came together to create a Black-centered movement in response to the murder of Trayvon Martin. In May 2020, the Black Lives Matter movement received global attention following the murder of George Floyd as well as the cases of Ahmaud Arbery and Breonna Taylor. This movement became recognized worldwide for its efforts towards ending police brutality and fighting racism. Many individuals have joined the movement as advocates who organize action within their own communities.

Advocates can engage in organizing on behalf of issues they are interested and passionate about. Advocates can join existing groups or can form new alliances. In forming new partnerships, identifying individuals with similar interests and finding individuals who can contribute expertise or resources can be helpful in accomplishing advocacy efforts. Once a group is established, it is essential to identify the goals and advocacy efforts of the group. When organizing, it is important to remain optimistic and to remember that the process of building power takes time.



Some boarding schools that existed in Wisconsin include Menominee Boarding School at Keshena, Oneida Boarding School at Oneida, Lac du Flambeau Boarding School at Lac du Flambeau, and Tomah Industrial School at Tomah. Throughout history, the U.S. government made various attempts to eradicate Native American communities in order to steal their lands and destroy their cultures. The United States was built upon a foundation of colonization and genocide that have left devastating impacts on many generations of Native American communities.

Today, there are about 9.7 million Native Americans living across the United States and 574 federally recognized tribes. The Ho-Chunk, Menominee, Chippewa, Potawatomi, and Oneida are among the original inhabitants that continue to have a strong presence in Wisconsin. As a result of the historical trauma, Native Americans experience many education, health, and economic disparities. Despite historical and current oppression, indigenous people have kept their legacy, cultures, and traditions flourishing through generations. Native American communities have persevered and continue to thrive. New generations of Native Americans and tribal leaders continue to advocate for the rights, health, and sovereignty of Native American communities.

The Enslavement of Africans

The institution of American slavery developed as a system tied to race. The historical legacy of slavery has deeply impacted Africans and their descendants. In 1619, people of African descent were captured and shipped under deadly conditions to the American colonies. During the more than 200 years of legal American slavery, an estimated 10.7 million Black men, women, and children were forced into slavery.

For hundreds of years, America depended on the free, forced labor of enslaved Africans for wealth and profit. Generally, Africans who were enslaved in the Northern states were forced into domestic labor and other forms of skilled labor. Meanwhile, individuals enslaved in the Southern states were forced primarily into agricultural labor.

By the 18th century, Northern states began to abolish slavery. Although slavery was prohibited in Wisconsin through the Northwest Ordinance of 1787, the history of slavery in Wisconsin began when early settlers from the South brought enslaved Africans to the state during the fur trade era. An estimated 500 enslaved Africans were present in the region during this time. The growth of the lead mining industry in the 1820's led to an increase of slavery in Wisconsin. By 1842 most African Americans in Wisconsin gained their freedom and remained to work in the lead industry. By 1860 there were 1,200 free African Americans in Wisconsin.

In the South, slavery continued, as it played a role in underpinning the plantation economy. The South did not want to abolish slavery, and eventually it seceded from the United States and created the Confederate States of America. This led to the Civil War which began in 1861 and lasted 4 years when the Confederate States surrendered.

After the war ended in 1865, the United States adopted the 13th Amendment to abolish slavery and involuntary servitude. This did not stop white residents as they turned to forms of violence, terror, and abuse to further marginalize African Americans.

Jim Crow Laws

After ratification of the 13th amendment, the racial oppression of African Americans continued. “Black Codes” were restrictive laws created to limit the freedom and labor of African Americans. During this time, the Ku Klux Klan, a white supremacist group, and other unorganized white people violently terrorized Black communities. From 1882 to 1968 an estimated 4,743 lynchings occurred in the United States. The Jim Crow Laws, which legalized racial segregation, spread nationwide. These laws, stemming from and reinforcing white supremacy, created profound barriers to opportunities for African Americans and largely prevented them from progressing in society. Segregation was enforced in most public spaces, which impacted various functions of day-to-day life and participation in government. Most public spaces had designated “whites only” and “colored” signs to reinforce segregation. Furthermore, Jim Crow Laws denied Black Americans the right to vote by utilizing literacy tests and poll taxes. This followed generations of enslavement and longstanding laws that forbade the literacy of enslaved people. Jim Crow Laws also outlawed interracial marriage and prohibited interactions between Black and white communities. Failure to follow these laws resulted in fines, imprisonment, and the possibility of being violently beaten or lynched.

In the 1900’s the African American population began to increase in the state of Wisconsin as more manufacturing employment opportunities became available. However, racial discrimination and segregation continued throughout the state in areas such as employment, education, and housing. The city of Milwaukee was known as one of the most segregated cities in the United States. In 1954, *Brown v. The Board of Education* ruled that separating children in public schools was unconstitutional; however, this did not create changes in Milwaukee Public Schools. As a result of civil rights demonstrations, in 1979 the Milwaukee school system eventually created a desegregation plan. Legislation was not passed to prevent discrimination in the housing market until 1968, after years of protests. Today, in Milwaukee segregation persists due to discriminatory practices, such as redlining, that deny communities of color equal access to loan and housing opportunities.

During the 1950s and 1960s the Civil Rights Movement built momentum in its efforts to gain equal rights for Black Americans in the United States. Both Black and white communities mobilized to fight for equality. Martin Luther King Jr., Rosa Parks, the Little Rock Nine, and many other individuals fought for desegregation.

In 1964, President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act, which legally ended segregation and discrimination on the basis of race, color, religion, sex or national origin. Although legal segregation ended, racism towards African Americans continued. The history of racial injustice in the United States has left an intergenerational impact on the country that is evident in the racial disparities that continue to exist.



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Immigration Policies

There have been many waves of immigration to the United States. This has historically been connected to conditions in immigrants' home countries outside of their control, such as violence, war, uninhabitable conditions, and lack of access to food, housing and employment. As immigrants from all over the world began arriving in the United States, race became a factor in determining who was "accepted" into this country. White Europeans experienced a generally smooth welcome into the United States, immigrants of color faced a more challenging and violent experience.

Since its beginning, the U.S. Government has created and enforced racist immigration policies. The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 was one of the first significant laws that restricted immigration into the United States. White Americans began to fear that Chinese immigrants were taking their jobs. Under this law, congress suspended Chinese immigration and made Chinese immigrants ineligible for naturalization. Years later, the Immigration Act of 1924 established a quota system that limited the number of immigrants entering the United States. This policy reduced the number of the "less desirable" immigrants by favoring immigration from Northern and Western European countries, and prohibiting immigration from most countries in Asia altogether. During this time, the U.S. Border Patrol was established to control immigration from the Mexican and Canadian borders.

To meet an increased demand for agricultural workers in the 20th century, Wisconsin implemented policies to bring migrant workers to the state. The Bracero Program of 1942 was a labor agreement between the United States and Mexico that brought millions of Mexican workers to the U.S. to work short-term contracts. In 1943 the Emergency Farm Labor Program was established, and Wisconsin farmers imported male workers from countries such as Jamaica, the Bahamas, and British Honduras (present day Belize) to work the fields.



Migrant workers experienced low wages and unfit working conditions in Wisconsin. In California, the National Farmworkers Association, also known as the United Farm Workers, began a union organizing effort to improve farm working conditions. As a result of this effort, Jesus Salas led a union organizing drive for migrant workers in Wisconsin. In August of 1966 migrant workers marched from Wautoma to Madison to hold lawmakers accountable. The Farmworkers Movement established better pay and working conditions for migrant workers across the country, including Wisconsin.

Negative attitudes toward Latin American communities remained, influencing government policies and contributing to various deportation efforts of individuals of Mexican descent, including U.S. citizens. Racist immigration policies implemented throughout U.S. history have negatively impacted the lives of immigrants of color. However, these racist immigration policies are not only a thing of the past. In recent years presidential administrations banned travel from Muslim countries, suspended the resettlement of Syrian refugees, and forced asylum seekers to remain in other countries while government officials considered their applications. The racist legacy and current structure of the immigration system has produced fear of deportation, detention, and family separation that disproportionately affect immigrants of color in U.S. society.



The Structure of the Wisconsin State Government

Like the federal government, Wisconsin state government has three branches: the legislative branch, the executive branch, and the judicial branch. In policy advocacy, the executive and legislative branches are the primary focus.

The Legislative Branch Includes:

- The Wisconsin Senate, which has 33 members, elected for four-year terms. The Wisconsin Senate is different from the U.S. Senate. People in the Wisconsin Senate are called “senators”;
- The Wisconsin Assembly, which has 99 members, elected for two-year terms. People in the Assembly are called “representatives”; and
- Both the Assembly and Senate have committees on specific topics.

Together, the Senate and the Assembly make up the Wisconsin Legislature. The Legislature’s job is to review and pass laws, including the budget.

The Executive Branch Includes:

- The Governor, who is elected for a four-year term. The Governor signs or vetoes bills, proposes a state budget, and acts as the head to state agencies that implement laws;
- The Attorney General, also elected for a four-year term, who is the chief lawyer of the state government, and advises state agencies and the Legislature;
- State agencies, like the Department of Health Services, that carry out state laws and policy.

The Wisconsin State Legislative Process

The Legislature has a two-year schedule called a biennial session. It begins in the first week of each odd-numbered year. The first days of the new session are dedicated to organizing the Legislature, appointing committees, and creating a session calendar. The session calendar generally tells people when each house of the Legislature will debate and vote on proposed bills and when committee work will take place. However, the Legislature can deviate from this calendar by either deciding to do so on their own or by the Governor calling them into a “special session” to consider specific legislation.

Most of the work of the Legislature is done through lawmaking, by proposing, considering, and voting on bills or joint resolutions.

A bill is a proposal submitted by a member of the Legislature or the Governor to:

- Create a new law,
- Amend an existing law, or
- Remove an existing law

The idea for a bill may come from the Wisconsin Legislature, their constituents, lobbyists, the Governor, or heads of state agencies charged with administering the law. A non-partisan government agency called the Legislative Reference Bureau helps to draft the bill.



Once a bill is introduced, usually by a legislator or the Governor, Assembly and Senate leadership refer it to a committee where it waits for a public hearing. The chair of the committee determines which bills will be considered at a particular meeting. The author of the bill (the legislator who pitches the bill) is usually the first to speak, and introduces the bill to the committee. The public then has the opportunity to voice support for or opposition to a bill. During this process, committee members can ask questions to people providing testimony or to staff from the Legislative Council, another legislative agency which provides legal and policy analysis about the impact of proposed legislation.

Every person in Wisconsin should have the right to attend a committee meeting and speak about legislation. Testimony from community members can influence legislators. However, these meetings are held during the workday, sometime with only a day or two public notice, and it's up to the committee chair whether you must testify in person or if they will accept testimony by email or virtually.

Following a public hearing, committees usually schedule another meeting, called an executive session, to make any amendments and vote on whether to pass the bill out of their committee or not. If the majority of legislators on a committee vote yes, then it passes out of the committee and is ready for consideration by the full chamber, either the Assembly or Senate.

Chamber leadership generally decides which bills are scheduled for a vote by the whole chamber (called a floor vote) and when. During a floor vote, a bill can be debated by the full chamber, amended, and voted up or down. If it passes it goes to the other chamber to be considered. The process for the bill in the other chamber is usually very similar.

If a bill passes through both the Senate and Assembly it is sent to the Governor who can either sign it into law or veto it. If the Governor takes no action on a bill within a certain amount of time, the bill automatically becomes law. If the Governor vetoes the bill, it returns to the Assembly and Senate for reconsideration. With a two-thirds vote in both the Assembly and Senate, the Legislature can override the Governor's veto and enact the bill into law.

Wisconsin State Budget

The state budget includes many decisions that can help or hinder racial equity, and it is one of the main ways that lawmakers set priorities for allocating public resources. Lawmakers also typically use the budget as a means to pass a variety of policies that don't directly involve money.

The budget is an expression of the state's priorities, in terms of how we raise resources, how we spend those resources, and other policy decisions. Conversations around the budget often center on scarcity and trade offs, with lawmakers expressing theoretical willingness to make investments in Wisconsin kids and families, but instead prioritizing large corporations and the rich and powerful over Wisconsin's families, schools, and communities. Using this frame has meant that lawmakers help wealthy people who have rigged the system for their own benefit, while people who work for a living, people not able to work, people of color, kids, and immigrants have far less opportunity.

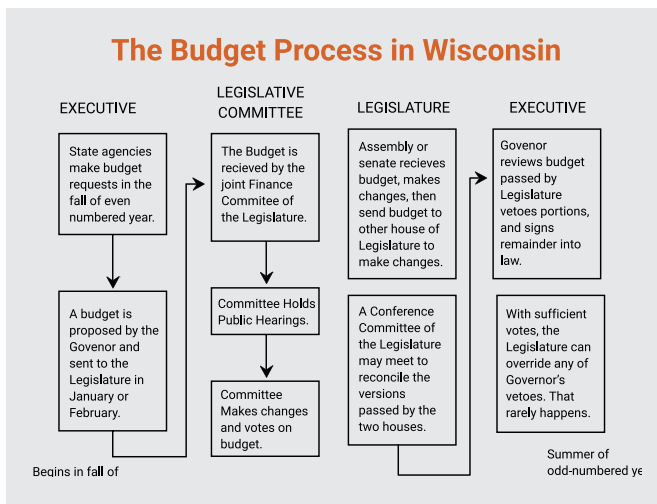
The Wisconsin Budget Process

Wisconsin has a two-year budget that runs from July of one odd-numbered year through June of the following odd-numbered year—for example, from July 2023 through June 2025.

The budget process starts when state agencies submit their budget requests to the Governor in the fall of even numbered years. The Governor takes those requests under advisement, and then releases a new version of a budget, usually in February of an odd-numbered year. You can contact the Governor at any time to make your voice heard on budget priorities.

The next step for the budget is to go to the Legislature's powerful budget committee, referred to as the Joint Committee on Finance, or just Joint Finance or JFC. In theory, this committee holds hearings and votes on changes to the budget. If the majority in the Legislature is from a different political party than the Governor, the committee may largely bypass the Governor's recommendations and assemble its own budget. This committee holds a few listening sessions in different locations around the state at which people can try to testify, although the amount of time available is very limited.

People can also communicate with the committee by email.



After going through the Joint Finance Committee, the budget has to be passed by both houses of the Legislature. If the same party holds both houses of the Legislature, lawmakers in different houses often work out major differences prior to the budget leaving the Joint Finance Committee, and lawmakers make only minor changes to the budget as it goes through the Assembly and the Senate.

After both houses of the Legislature pass the budget, it goes to the Governor for signature and any vetoes the Governor might issue. The Governor can take provisions out but generally can't put things back in. Once he signs the budget, it becomes law.

Many public policies have had the harmful consequence of negatively impacting communities of color, whether intentionally or unintentionally. As a result, it is important for advocates and those working towards greater racial equity to articulate the racial equity impact of proposed or existing policies. This is called a Racial Equity Impact Assessment (REIA), modeled off the decades old use of environmental impact assessments to document and account for any adverse and unforeseen consequences of the decision to communities of color.

The benefit to conducting an REIA is that it functions as a tool to interrupt ongoing systemic racism and rewire our decision making calculations to repair and not compound institutional racism in our policies and procedures. This type of assessment can be done at all levels of decision making including institutional, city, county, municipal and state levels.

Public Resources

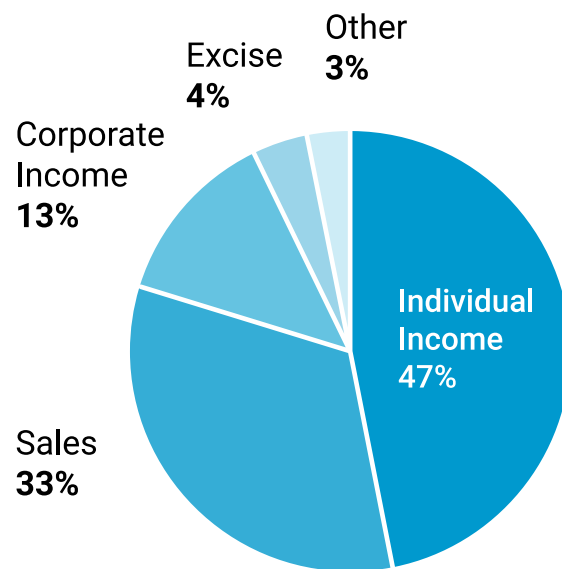
Public resources should be invested in a way that broadly benefits everyone in Wisconsin, and starts to undo the legacy of racial discrimination that makes it difficult for many families of color to thrive.

The main source of revenue to fund critical priorities is what's called General Purpose Revenue, or GPR, which is mostly made up of tax money, and can be used for a variety of purposes. Half of GPR comes from the income tax, with the sales tax being the second-biggest category.

There are other types of revenue in the budget, including money that comes from the federal government, user fees and tuition, and money deposited into specific funds. These other types of revenue can typically only be used for specific purposes and are not as flexible as GPR.

General Purpose Revenue Taxes by Source

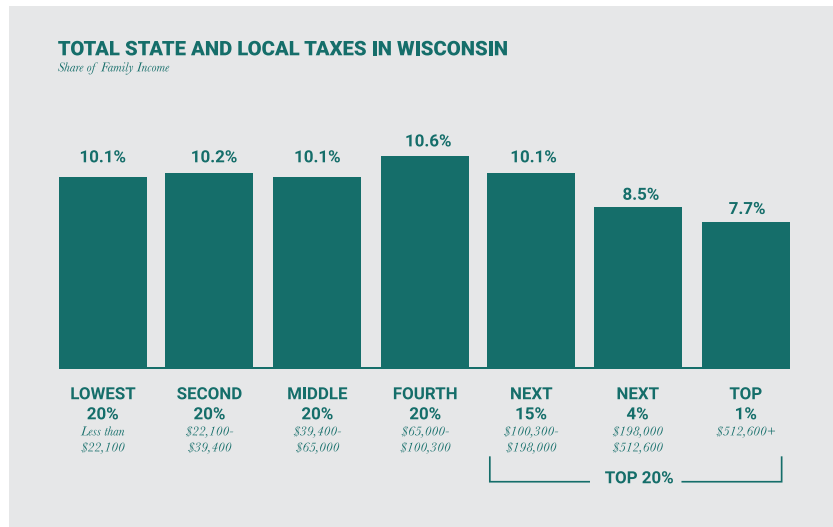
For 2021.



Source: Wisconsin Department of Administration, Wisconsin Budget Project

Who Pays Taxes?

Wisconsin's tax system provides a significant advantage to wealthy taxpayers over everyone else. The richest residents of Wisconsin pay the smallest share of their income in taxes of any income group, leaving Wisconsin residents with low and moderate incomes to make up the difference. Taxpayers in the top 1% pay just 7.7% of their income in state and local income taxes, compared to 10.1% paid by taxpayers in the bottom 20%. This shows the extent to which our tax system has been created to benefit the wealthy and powerful, with everyone else making up the difference.

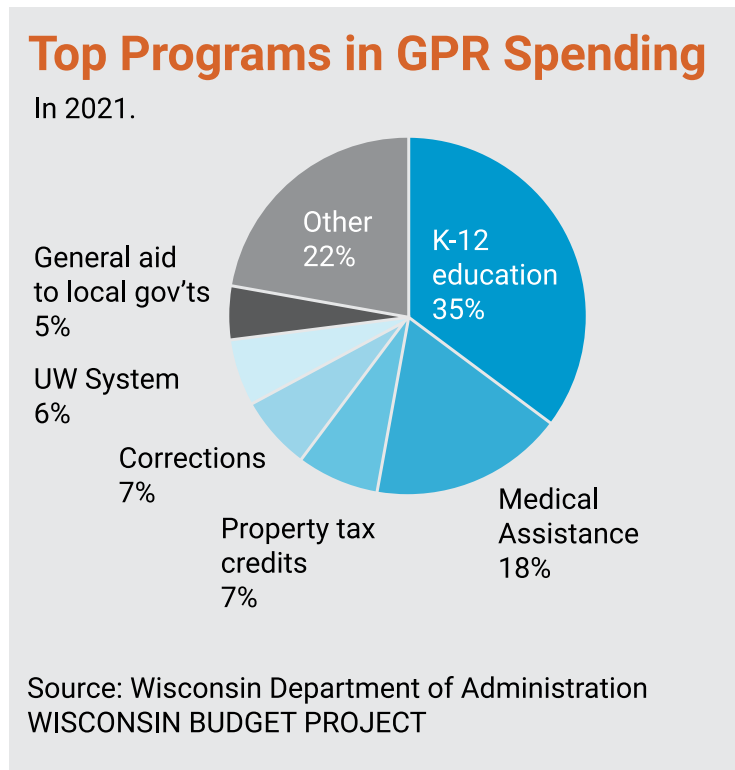


Top Budget Priorities

The single biggest category of GPR spending is for K-12 schools. In Wisconsin, schools get most of their money through a combination of state aid and local property taxes.

Medical assistance, which includes BadgerCare, is the second biggest category of spending. Medical assistance is health insurance for people and families with low incomes, older adults, and people with disabilities. The state's corrections system and University of Wisconsin are the next largest categories of GPR spending.

Advocates can make their voices heard during the budget process to help lawmakers understand the priorities and values of their constituents.



Policy Advocacy Toolkit

Who Represents You?

By going on the Wisconsin Legislature website (<https://legis.wisconsin.gov>) you can find your local legislators by entering in your address.

The Wisconsin Legislature website provides information to:

- Learn about the Wisconsin State Senate, Assembly, and Committees.
- Learn more about the background of your elected officials and their areas of interest.
- Learn about the demographics of their district and their committee assignments.
- Look at the bills they have introduced in recent years.
- Develop your knowledge on a particular issue or policy.

Writing Your Legislator

Writing a letter to an elected official can be an effective way to raise awareness to a particular issue or policy that is affecting the community. Sending your letter through an email can be beneficial due to speed and ease of delivery. Within your letter it is important to outline the issue and explain how it is affecting the community. This can be a powerful way to get an issue noticed by legislators who have the power to help you!

- Explain the purpose of your letter at the beginning. Be specific and state the policy and the issue in the first sentence.
- Summarize your understanding of the issue and the general impact on the community.
- You should describe in detail your position on the issue. Remember to be personal and explain what the changes on this issue will mean to you. Inform the legislator about other community members who are affected by the issue.
- Describe the action you hope the elected official will take and explore the various options that can help improve the community.
- Close the letter by thanking the legislator and signing the letter with your name. Make sure to include your address and phone number. Including this information, if you are comfortable doing so, will prove that you live in their district and they will more seriously consider your comments.



Calling Your Legislator

Calling your legislator is another efficient way to communicate to your legislator about a specific issue or policy.

Before calling

Have the information necessary to communicate your message to the legislator. It can be beneficial to write down some notes to help guide your discussion.

During the phone call

Introduce yourself, tell them that you live in their district (if you do) and clearly state your position on the policy or issue you want the legislator to address. Explain why this issue is important to you and the actions they should take to address your concerns. If your legislator is busy, ask their staff member to relay your concerns to the legislator.

At the end of the call

Remember to thank the legislator for their time and consideration of your policy advocacy efforts.

Meeting With Your Legislator

One-on-one meetings with your legislators can help advance your policy advocacy goals. All legislators within Wisconsin have an office at the state capitol in Madison. Developing a relationship with your legislators can be one of the most effective ways to advocate for policy change. Meetings with elected officials are limited; therefore, it is essential to develop a plan for your meeting.

Make an appointment

You should first contact your legislator or their staff members directly to request a meeting. On the Wisconsin State Legislature website, you can find contact information for the legislator you want to meet with. You can also reach your legislators by calling the Legislative Hotline in Madison, WI by dialing 608-266-9960 (<https://legis.wisconsin.gov/about/contact>). You can also dial their toll-free number at 1-800-362-9472.

Prepare for the meeting

To prepare for your meeting, develop an agenda and/or a memo to define your message. Remember to frame an issue that is informed by the communities affected. Effective messaging will communicate how policy solutions can benefit the community as a whole.

During the meeting

First you should briefly introduce yourself/your organization. Next, clearly state why you are there and what you want to accomplish during the meeting. Describe your issue, solutions, and the local impact. A focus on racial equity allows you to inform your legislator about inequities that exist related to your issue and can bring awareness to barriers they need to address. Bring voices and stories of community members affected by the issue to demonstrate the importance of your position.

After the meeting

Write a thank you note or an email to the legislator who met with you. Thank them for meeting with you and briefly restate the policy issue you want to be addressed.

A few tips about meeting with your legislators

- You don't need to be an expert to be an effective advocate. Focusing on your story or the impact of your community can be powerful.
- Legislators often know a little bit about many different issues. Most likely your legislators aren't experts either, and you might well know more about the issue and its impact.
- It's okay to say you don't know the answer to a question they ask. If you can, tell them you can share that information with them later. This also gives you another reason to contact them again.

Online Advocacy

The use of social media platforms can be a powerful advocacy method. Social media can be used to help amplify your advocacy efforts by allowing you to reach a larger audience. Today, platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok are commonly used to inform and mobilize people to take action around an issue. Each platform draws a slightly different audience; therefore, it is important to consider which audience you are attempting to reach. Through social media you can organize volunteers, donations, fundraisers, and bring people together for public demonstrations, meetings, and public hearings.

You can also post directly to a legislator or on their social media pages. This can be a powerful way to make a public statement or request and can lead to more people following your lead.

When creating content:

- Post engaging content that includes relevant information and an image related to your issue. When needed you should include relevant links, such as videos, articles, websites, or organizations, that support your message.
- Keep posts short. Lengthy posts could disengage the audience.



- Consider the times that engagement is high for your social media post, such as the evenings or weekends.
- Engage with comments and respond to questions.
- Post frequently to increase your engagement over time.

Public Demonstrations

A public demonstration is when a group of people comes together at a specific time and place to call for action on or raise awareness of a particular issue. For policy advocacy, a public demonstration can urge legislators to implement policies to address the needs of the community. It can show support or opposition to a specific policy. This form of advocacy draws attention to an issue by creating a public impact and getting the attention of members of the media.

Throughout U.S. history public demonstrations have taken place to speak against community injustice. Some examples include the Women’s Suffrage Parade (1913), the March on Washington (1963), the Stonewall Riots (1969), the Women’s March on Washington (2017), and the George Floyd protests (2020).

- Identify your goals
- Decide who are the audiences and/or target(s) for the demonstration
- Determine a date, time, and place
- Decide whether you are going to get permits and approval for the demonstration
- Decide what roles people will have during the event, such as media contacts, medics, safety/escorts, speakers, logistics, etc.
- Consider a symbolic activity to implement at the demonstration, such as having speeches, staging a sit-in, or chanting slogans.

This is only a starting point—there are numerous resources to help you organize in your community, including:

- [rePower](#) offers training and strategic support to BIPOC leaders and community organizations, focusing on movements, technology, civic engagement, governance, and women of color leadership.
- [Movement School](#) cultivates leaders and organizers to fight on behalf of their working class communities by providing tools & resources.

Registering To Vote

Voting allows for your voice to be heard in local, state, and federal elections. To engage in voting, you must register to vote! To register to vote you will need a proof of residence document that includes your name and current address. This document may be presented by paper or electronically. The most common proof of residence documents include a Wisconsin driver’s license or state ID, a utility bill, or a paycheck. Any document that is issued by a government entity is an acceptable proof of residence document. View [Proof of Residence Voter Registration Information here](#). Note: the above information is current as of September 2022. Voting regulations may change in the future—visit <https://elections.wi.gov/voters> for the most up-to-date rules.

In Wisconsin there are many ways to register to vote:

- Online (up to 20 days before the election)
- By mail at your local municipal clerk's office (up to 20 days before the election)
- In person at your local municipal clerk's office (through the Friday before the election)
- At your polling place on Election Day

Voting registration forms in English, Spanish, and Hmong: <https://elections.wi.gov/forms/el-131-fillable>

The MyVote Wisconsin website provides voter information. The following website will assist you in determining your current registration status. You will be able to register to vote, find polling places for upcoming elections, request an absentee ballot, and learn about what is on your ballot. You can also find information about your local municipal clerk's office for in-person registration options. If you have moved, you will need to update your voter information by submitting a new voter registration. MyVote Wisconsin website: <https://myvote.wi.gov/en-us/Register-To-Vote>

Obstacles To Voting

Throughout U.S. history there have been policies implemented by the government to restrict voting rights. Today, across the nation policies continue to make it harder for marginalized populations to exercise their right to vote, especially among communities of color. The following section will address policies, such as Photo ID laws, that restrict people from voting. Furthermore, it will raise awareness to current populations who are excluded from voting and alternative forms of policy advocacy that these populations can engage in. Note: the below information is current as of September 2022. Voting regulations may change in the future—visit <https://elections.wi.gov/voters> for the most up-to-date rules.

Photo ID for Voting

The state of Wisconsin has one of the most restrictive voter photo ID laws in the nation. The most common form of photo ID is a driver's license; however, over 30% of adults in Wisconsin are non-drivers. This includes many people with disabilities, older adults, low-income individuals, and undocumented individuals. Many do not have another form of acceptable photo ID, such as a Wisconsin state ID, U.S. passport, military ID, tribal ID, or student ID.

Although a free ID for voting can be obtained at the Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV), many people who need a photo ID have limited access to the DMV due to transportation or accessibility issues. In rural areas this can be difficult because DMV offices have limited hours of operation and may be at a significant distance of travel.

Furthermore, it can be a challenge to provide a copy of a birth certificate and other necessary documentation. The ID and Identification Card Petition Process (IDPP) may allow them to get a temporary free ID for voting while individuals gather needed documents.

Non-Citizens

To become eligible to vote in the United States individuals are required to be U.S. Citizens. This restricts non-citizens, including immigrants who are permanent residents and undocumented immigrants from voting in elections in the United States. The process of gaining citizenship is often long, difficult, and expensive. To become a citizen, a permanent resident must have a green card for at least 5 years, take a series of tests that have high application fees, and pass an interview with U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services. In the United States there are about 25 million immigrants who are not citizens. Despite the contributions they provide to the U.S. economy, this population is unable to vote for their representatives but is impacted by their decisions.

Individuals Who Are Incarcerated

As of 2020, 5.2 million Americans were disenfranchised as a result of policies that prohibit individuals who are incarcerated from voting. In Wisconsin over 65,000 individuals are not allowed to vote due to incarceration or felony supervision. Policies regarding voting eligibility for individuals who are incarcerated vary from state to state.

- 11 states restrict voting rights for individuals who have been incarcerated even after they are released and have completed their terms of probation and parole. These state policies disenfranchise an estimated 2.2 million people who either lose their right to vote indefinitely, need to petition the Governor, or complete some other bureaucratic hurdle in order to have their voting rights restored.
- 16 states, including Wisconsin, restore voting rights after the prison sentence, parole, probation, and extended supervision are completed. In Wisconsin, this rule only applies to felony convictions. If you have been convicted of a misdemeanor (with the exception of treason or bribery), you can still vote even when in jail or prison or on probation or parole.
- The remaining 21 states only restrict voting rights during the prison sentence.

These various policies do not allow for full democratic participation of all individuals or promote effective reentry into society.

The restriction on voting rights for individuals who are incarcerated has disproportionately impacted communities of color. African Americans are four times more likely to lose their voting rights in comparison to the rest of the adult population. As of 2020, 1.8 million Black citizens have been banned from voting in elections. Voting policies within 34 states have disproportionately disenfranchised the Latinx population. These policies create structural barriers for communities of color and contribute to the racial inequities that exist in this country.

In addition, people with mental illness and other disabilities are overrepresented in jails and prisons, and disenfranchised by these policies. In Wisconsin over 41% of men and 90% of women in the prison system have a mental health condition.

In Wisconsin, residents with criminal convictions are often unsure if they have the right to vote, and may be fearful of registering to vote or cast a ballot. The following website is a resource that addresses voting rights for people with criminal convictions in Wisconsin: <https://www.aclu-wi.org/en/votingrightscriminalconvictions>.

People With Disabilities

The disability community is diverse and it includes people who are blind or have low vision, deaf or hard of hearing, intellectual and developmental disabilities, physical disabilities, mental health disabilities, complex medical needs, and chronic health conditions. Many older adults have disabilities acquired through aging, although they may not formally identify as a person with disability. People with disabilities intersect all walks of life, all professions, across all races, ethnicities, gender identities, sexual orientations, and socioeconomic status. According to the CDC 26% (1 in 4) adults have some type of disability. Oppressive systems, such as racism and ableism, often intersect compounding barriers that people of color with disabilities face in access to spaces, accommodations, and the exercise of their rights, including voting.

In Wisconsin all adults have the right to vote unless they have been legally declared incompetent and have specifically had their voting rights and freedoms taken away through court. Individuals under guardianship retain their right to vote unless a judge removes their right. People often automatically perceive that these individuals are unqualified to vote; however, guardianship does not define their capacity to vote. People should assume that every person, regardless of disability, has a right to vote.

Historically, people with disabilities are underrepresented at the ballot box. Individuals with disabilities experience various barriers to voting, such as lack of transportation and lack of photo ID. There is limited information about disability related accommodations and voting rights provided to voters. In 2020, it was estimated by the Election Assistance Commission and Rutgers University that one in nine voters with disabilities encountered challenges while attempting to vote in the United States. Polling places often fail to accommodate people with physical disabilities; for example, in 2016 the Wisconsin Government Accountability Office found that 60 percent of polling places were inaccessible for people with disabilities in some way. Absentee voting is heavily utilized by disabled voters due to barriers that restrict their ability to vote in person.



Additionally, poll workers often deny or fail to provide legally required accommodations. People with disabilities may further experience restrictions due to guardianship and disability related misinformation and discrimination on behalf of poll workers.

Procedural, attitudinal, and physical barriers can threaten the rights of people with disabilities and threaten their freedom or access to independently participate in voting. In Wisconsin, every citizen old enough to vote, regardless of their disability, guardianship status, or living environment, has the right to vote unless a judge has ruled otherwise.

Resources

- Disability Rights Wisconsin Voter Hotline: 844-DIS-VOTE/ 844-347-8683. Email: info@disabilityvote.org
- Wisconsin Disability Vote Coalition: <https://disabilityvote.org/>
- English Voting Rights Fact Sheet: <https://disabilityvote.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Voting-Rights-Fact-Sheet-1020-acc.pdf>
- Spanish Voting Rights Fact Sheet: <https://disabilityvote.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/DVC-Voting-Rights-Fact-Sheet-Spanish-acc.pdf>

What Types Of Policy Advocacy Can Individuals With No Voting Rights Engage In?

Federal and state policies often disenfranchise non-citizen immigrants and individuals who are incarcerated, and less commonly people with disabilities. If you are a part of this population you can still engage in other forms of policy advocacy, including contacting your legislator, participating in community organizing and public demonstrations, and registering others to vote. You can make your voice heard even if you can't vote!

Alternatives to Voting

- You can communicate with your legislators in support of or opposition to legislation, regardless of your voter eligibility. You can educate legislators on behalf of the issues that you and other people are experiencing as a result of voting restrictions. Through this form of advocacy you can urge legislators to take action on community issues.
- Individuals who are not eligible to vote can participate in community organizing and public demonstrations. Through this you can engage in building collective power to advocate for a particular policy issue.
- When considering the type of policy advocacy you want to engage in, it is important to consider the possible risks. Individuals with restricted voting rights can attend public demonstrations, but it is important to recognize that, depending on the permitted status and nature of the demonstration, there could be a potential risk of arrest.
- Even if you are not able to participate in voting, you can use your voice to inform others about the importance of voting. You can participate in events focused on helping others to register to vote. Many populations face challenges to participate in voting, due to language, literacy, or accessibility barriers. By helping people to register to vote, understand the issues and candidates in the election, get to the polls, and cast their ballot, you can increase voter turnout!

Remember: you have the constitutional right to freedom of speech and this means you have the right to engage in various forms of advocacy towards policy change!



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Who We Are

Kids Forward is a statewide non-profit, non-partisan organization established in 1881 in Madison, Wisconsin. The mission of Kids Forward is to inspire action and promote access to opportunity for every kid, every family, and every community in Wisconsin - notably children and families of color and those furthest from opportunity. We envision a Wisconsin where every child thrives. Kids Forward focuses on improving conditions for children and families through research, policy analysis, public education, community engagement, and advocacy in areas of early care and education, health, economic security, racial equity, tax and budget issues, and juvenile justice.

Acknowledgements

We would like to specially acknowledge the support, partnership and contributions that made this guide possible. This report was written by Amanda Martinez with contributions from other staff at Kids Forward. Thank you to Terrence Adeyanju Design LLC for graphic design and layout. Permission to copy, disseminate or otherwise use this information from this policy guide is granted as long as appropriate acknowledgement is given.

The core values of Kids Forward are

Compassion

We seek to understand the life situations of every child and family, and act out of a deep concern for those further from opportunity.

Equity

We work to build the best future possible for every child and every family in Wisconsin—especially for children and families of color and those furthest from opportunity.

Inquiry

We use sound data, listen to diverse voices, respect the expertise that resides within each community, and share what we learn.

Accountability

We live our values internally, as we stand up for every kid and family.



kidsforward.org